

Truman, Harry S.

May 4, 1947

President Truman understood very well the importance of regulating his own schedule as to fit the needs of his staff for timely guidance and directions. For example, the time for holding "speech conferences" with the staff were fixed more often at my suggestion than at his. If his schedule was so tight they could not be fitted in during the day, he would come back to the Cabinet Room in the evening—and he would come cheerfully. It's a unique experience to be telling the President of the United States he has to come back to the office to work after dinner—and, of course, I never put it just that way.

CONTINUITY

Speaking of staff, when I think of President Truman I often think of an advertisement that was current some years ago—"Tough but Oh so gentle". In many ways, President Truman really was as tough as a boot, but with his personal staff he was extremely gentle. In fact, he was more lenient at times than he should have been, and that got him into trouble more than once. On the other hand, the staff returned his kindness with an extraordinary amount of hard work, voluntary overtime, and wholehearted, single-minded devotion.

The ways in which he showed consideration for his staff were countless. Mrs. Truman joined him in this. I'm sure that on her part this was a natural manifestation of the nobility and generosity of her nature. I'm sure, too, that this was the real motivating factor for him. But I also suspect he was quite conscious of the dividends this brought him in terms of extra efforts from his staff.

There are different kinds of inspirational leadership. This particular kind might be ascribed for by almost any one in a position of leadership, even though his natural talents are far less than those of Mr. Truman. I commend it to the thoughtful consideration of executives everywhere as a possible means of getting more work, better work, and happier work from their organizations. But remember that one prerequisite for its success is that the man at the top has to work harder than any one else.

DEDICATION

Mr. Truman, from start to finish, regarded the office of President of the United States with enormous respect. He regarded his tenure there as a trust of the highest order. One does not think of him as being sanctimonious. He was not. At the same time, he was completely incapable of doing anything as President that he thought was wrong. The problems of the Presidency are so complicated and unprecedented that—for all of Mr. Truman's wisdom and talent for simplification—it was frequently difficult to tell what action was right and what was wrong in a particular situation; but what he thought was right was what he did.

He used to say to me, "Murph, I can't do that. It wouldn't be right." He didn't say, "I won't"; he said, "I can't." That was all the reason he gave and all the reason he needed. If I pressed him about some of these things, as I did on occasion, he would get more formal and call me "Murphy".

COURAGE

Much has been said about President Truman's courage. I do not know how much credit he is entitled to on this score. I've frequently heard that the highest form of courage is to be brave even when you are afraid. So far as I was able to tell, President Truman was never afraid of anything. So I can't tell me what the philosophical question of how courageous a man can be if fear is not a factor in his make-up.

LEARNING

President Truman never stopped studying; he never stopped learning. As long as he was in the White House, he made a conscious and deliberate effort to learn how to be a better President. He was almost 61 years old when he came to the Presidency, almost 69 when

he left it. But few men at any age have had such an intensive, productive and successful learning experience.

He learned by choice, not just as a by-product of experience. Although he was by far the wisest and most knowledgeable man among the group that worked with and for him, he always kept trying to learn something from the rest of us. He made it extremely easy for his staff to tell him what they really thought—whether it was yes, no, or maybe. Harry Truman was not surrounded by yes men. We all knew who was boss, and we accepted his decisions and followed his orders. But we were encouraged to be both honest and candid in expressing our views.

I have heard, with some amusement, discussions of an alleged battle between liberals and conservatives for President Truman's mind. I would note first that he had a mind of his own and made it up for himself. And on most of the issues that usually distinguish liberals from conservatives in our political idiom, he was a liberal before he came to the White House and all the time he was there. His liberal views were based on much practical knowledge from earlier experiences and from his study of history, and he held them with deep conviction.

He was not distinctly a professing liberal. Indeed, he seemed to have some distaste for persons who launched their liberalism. But on the issues, there was never really any doubt in my mind about where he stood and was going to continue to stand. He always had within his official family a few conservatives whose views on social and economic issues differed sharply from his own. I asked him why he did this. His answer was essentially the same as these words of his in *Mr. President*:

"I like to have people understand each other, and that's why I have every shade of public opinion in my Cabinet."

"I have got a cross section of the thought and economic of the whole population of the United States in the Cabinet from left to right, and this makes for valuable discussions, and the only way you can get ideas. And I let everybody have his say before I come to a conclusion and decide on a final course of action."

I've even heard it said that President Truman was not aware of the battle for his mind that was going on around him. I think it would be closer to the truth to say he was drawing up the battle plans for both sides.

President Truman does not take the "liberal" point of view on every economic question. For example, he had an unshakable belief in the virtues of a balanced budget. He carried this belief with him when he left the White House. In 1960, President Kennedy recommended a tax cut when he did not expect it to result in a balanced budget. You may recall that President Truman, being in New York City at the time, was asked about this by a newspaperman on his morning walk—and replied that he did not think taxes should be cut until the budget was balanced. Understandably, this bothered President Kennedy, and he sent me to talk to President Truman about it. I did this. Finally, President Truman said that, although he would be extremely sorry to cause any trouble for President Kennedy, he could not change what he had said because that was what he believed; but, he said, he would try to keep quiet on the subject thereafter. I reported this to President Kennedy, and so far as I know, that ended the matter.

ORGANIZING THE PRESIDENCY

I spoke earlier about President Truman's ordinariness. This was manifest also in his continuing and substantial moves to improve the organization of the Presidential office—the national aids to the Presidency. This was brought home to him very strongly by the suddenness of his succession to the Presidency and the lack of preparation for the transition. I believe

that he had seen President Roosevelt privately only three times, and very briefly, since his inauguration as Vice President, and that no provision had been made to keep him informed of matters in the Executive Branch. This was far less troublesome in the domestic field than in defense and foreign affairs because Mr. Truman's experience in the Senate gave him an intimate knowledge of domestic issues and problems.

In defense and foreign affairs, the new President felt his lack of current information very keenly. He did several things about this. First, he resolved to try to see that those who might succeed to the Presidency thereafter would be fully and currently briefed on defense and foreign affairs. He arranged such briefings for the man in line to succeed him in the event of death or disability, and in the campaigns of 1948 and 1952 arranged such briefings for the Republican candidates. This was a personal idea of Mr. Truman's. Next, when he first came to the White House, he set about studying day and night until he caught up on the information that was available. And soon he set about improving the machinery for gathering and evaluating information.

He puts it this way in *Mr. President*:

"One of the basic things I did was to set up a Central Intelligence Agency. Admirals Leahy and Sowers, and the State, Defense, Treasury and Commerce Departments all helped me to set it up."

"Strange as it may seem, the President up to that time was not completely informed as to what was taking place in the world. Messages that came to the different departments of the executive branch often were not relayed to him because some official did not think it was necessary to inform the President. The President did not see many useful cables and telegrams that came from different American representatives abroad."

"I decided to put an end to this state of affairs."

"The Central Intelligence Agency now coordinates all the information that is available to the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the individual offices of the Army, Navy and Air Force, the Department of Commerce, and the Treasury. In this way I am able to get a concentrated survey of everything that takes place. If I need any elaboration I ask for it. I get a report from the Central Intelligence Agency every morning. In cases of emergency I get special reports. I get special reports on the situation in Korea throughout the day. I get a special report every day from the Secretary of State covering the entire diplomatic field. And once a week the director of the Central Intelligence Agency comes to see me and makes a personal report."

Next we should note the creation of the National Security Council as a major Presidential staff agency to provide continuing analysis and policy advice on defense-foreign policy-security matters. This became an extremely valuable aid to the President.

As I look back to consider who was President Truman's principal White House staff man in respect of defense and foreign policy, I conclude that he himself was that man. It also occurs to me somewhat ruefully that perhaps that is why his Presidency is so much more highly regarded in respect of foreign policy than in some other respects.

Intelligence reports were brought in each morning by the staff of the National Security Council and the President's Naval Aide, who spent about 20 minutes going over them with the President. Once each week, the Director of the CIA joined these men for a more extensive review. No other staff members were present.

The President met periodically with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Usually, no one else attended these meetings.

He met frequently with the Secretaries of State and Defense, together and separately.